

What is encephalitis?

Encephalitis means inflammation of the brain. It can occur as a primary illness or as a consequence of another illness. Encephalitis is a rare disease.

What causes encephalitis?

Primary encephalitis is an illness in which an infectious agent, such as a bacteria or virus, directly invades the central nervous system (brain). The illness is often carried to humans from mosquitoes and ticks. For more information on primary encephalitis, see your health department for a Fact Sheet on Arboviral Infections. Post-infectious encephalitis is also a disease of the central nervous system, but it usually occurs as a rare complication of a viral illness or as a consequence of receiving some vaccines. Post-infectious encephalitis most commonly follows a bout of chickenpox, mumps, or measles, or vaccination against measles.

What are the symptoms of encephalitis?

Encephalitis frequently presents with headache, fever, stiffness of the neck, and change in consciousness, ranging from sleepiness to confusion to unconsciousness.

How soon after exposure do symptoms appear?

Encephalitis may occur within 6 to 10 days after symptoms of a viral illness appear (such as measles, chickenpox, mumps). Encephalitis resulting from receiving a vaccine may occur 10 days to 3 weeks after the vaccination.

What is the treatment for encephalitis?

A person with encephalitis needs hospital care.

What should I do if I've been in contact with a person who has encephalitis?

You will not catch encephalitis from someone who has it. If the encephalitis resulted from another disease, such as measles, and you had contact with the person while he or she was sick with the initial disease, you may need some protection from that disease. Call your local health department if you have any questions about a possible exposure to an infectious disease.